

The education divide

Securing GPA 5 nowadays is not a magical or strenuous job. Only merit will not help. There are many other ways of securing higher marks, which board officials and examinees have evolved to force the students to go to private tutors to know those techniques. Rural teachers and students are totally in the dark about those techniques and strategies.

NAZRUL ISLAM

ONE of my nieces, after getting GPA 5 in the SSC examinations, didn't go for merit, lamenting that there was nothing special in securing the grade nowadays. It's really puzzling when we see that 52,500 students obtained GPA 5, with all the students of some city schools getting the highest grade. The pleasure of becoming a member of 10 is far better than becoming a member of 100 or 1,000.

Not too many years back, getting star marks or having a place in the merit list was a matter of pride for the students and their guardians. Now diamond and gold are being weighed in the same balance. Has the quality of students improved unimaginably or has the system of judging of the students weakened?

Another, and probably the most

disturbing phenomenon in the recent SSC results was the rural-urban gap. The syndrome started quite some time back, and it has become pervasive in recent times. The prevalent examination system and commercialisation of education are gradually elbowing out the meritorious rural students from getting higher education, thereby further widening the disparity between the rural and urban populations.

The widening gap was evident from the SSC results, where urban students had overwhelming supremacy over their rural counterparts. But there was a time when the scenario was entirely different.

The higher education institutions were mostly occupied by the wards of the rural middle class and peasants in the '60s, '70s and even in the '80s. Civil servants and technocrats of the '60s and '70s are

examples of the fact.

There were many reasons and logic behind the good results of the rural students. They were hard working, ambitious and optimistic. There were no private tutors either in the rural or in the urban areas. Textbooks and class teachers were the only tools to guide them.

But today's rural students have to compete with students who are equipped with more money and backing. From the first day of school, an urban student gets tutoring from experienced house tutors and coaching tutors.

After reaching class nine, he/she has to go for coaching in all the subjects throughout the year. A study says that an urban guardian, on average, spends Tk 5,000 a month for an SSC student. How can a rural farmer spend so much money for his wards?

But are the SSC results a mea-

surement of merit? Is it possible to quantify merit through an examination that is taken on a set of questions? But, in reality, that is the benchmark.

Depending on the results and scores in the SSC examinations, students will be enrolled in colleges and subsequently in universities. Despite having higher latent merit and ability, a rural student will be denied admission in the "good" colleges, thereby getting deprived of higher education.

Securing GPA 5 nowadays is not a magical or strenuous job. Only merit will not help. There are many other ways of securing higher marks, which board officials and examinees have evolved to force the students to go to private tutors to know those techniques.

Rural teachers and students are totally in the dark about those techniques and strategies. For example, my niece told me that merely answering the questions is not enough to secure full marks, you have to highlight the important points with coloured markers. Where does a rural student get a marker? Many haven't even heard about such a thing.

In fact, our policy-makers are out to produce an elitist class in the

country through introducing an elite education system. They have little or no concern about leaving a vast majority of the country's people in disarray. Interestingly, to bail out from any adverse situation, like food security, we rush to the rural people.

See the contributions of rural people to the country's economy. The highest forex-earners, unskilled or semi-skilled labourers, are rural people who have been working in the Middle East and Malaysia. Who is running the garments factories, another major forex-earner? Rural girls working for a pittance.

The country's job market has almost been closed for rural boys and girls. A year back, I conducted a survey in four high schools of Hatbandha in Lalmonirhat and in my own upazila in Bogra to look into the matter on my own initiative.

Although the survey was not representative, I found alarming evidence of how the rural young people were gradually being stamped out of higher education and jobs. The study shows that a substantial number of students of those four schools got chances in public universities or technical educational institutions and subsequently got first class jobs up to

the '80s.

The number started declining from the early '90s, and after 2005 it was zero. Failing to get any dignified job, about a dozen boys and girls of my village and neighbouring ones, after completing their Masters Degree from a local college, have joined primary schools as headmasters or assistant headmasters.

In fact, the doors of corporate and private houses and government bodies were shut for the rural students. Having a mere degree or good results does not ensure a job for a person nowadays. He/she has to know many other things outside the textbooks. Everybody wants a readymade person who can work soon after joining in the job. But where are the facilities for rural students to undergo such training?

Adding to the misery, the PSC is planning to abolish the district quota system, arguing that the quota system deprives the meritorious ones. The neo-elitists in the policy-making body are presenting peculiar logic in favour of the so-called meritorious ones. No doubt, the quality of civil service has gone down, but that can't be raised only by abolishing quota.

Most of the former CSPs of our



It's only one side of the story.

country are products of the quota system. Sixty percent of the posts of the Pakistan Civil Service were earmarked for candidates of the erstwhile East Pakistan. The beneficiaries of quota system are now vocal against the same system.

The time is not far away when the neo-elitists will implement their design and whim. The society has become one-eyed. Not many people nowadays think about the

other side of the coin.

The cornering of the rural population will in no way yield benefit for the nation. The circulation of blood in the head, depriving other parts of the body, is not a healthy symptom. Rather it will quicken the death. Our achievements will see a similar fate if measures are not taken in time.

Nazrul Islam is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Anti-Americanism and the Taliban

Pakistan must find the will to fight the Taliban. The state, at both the national and provincial level, must assert its responsibility to protect life and law rather than simply make deals. State functionaries, and even the khasadars, have disappeared from much of the tribal areas. Pakistan is an Islamic state falling into anarchy and chaos, being rapidly destroyed from within by those who claim to fight for Islam.

PERVEZ HOODBHAY

THE recent killing of eleven Pakistani soldiers at Gora Prai by American and Nato forces across the border in Afghanistan unleashed an amazing storm.

Prime Minister Gilani declared: "We will take a stand for sovereignty, integrity and self-respect." The military announced defiantly: "We reserve the right to protect our citizens and soldiers against aggression," while army chief, Gen Pervez Ashfaq Kayani, called the attack "cowardly." The dead became shaheeds, and large numbers of people turned up to pray at their funerals.

But, had the killers been the Taliban, this would have been a

non-event. The storm we saw was more about cause than consequence. Protecting the sovereignty of the state, self-respect, citizens and soldiers against aggression, and the lives of Pakistani soldiers, suddenly all acquired value because the killers were American and Nato troops.

Compare the response to Gora Prai with the near silence about the recent kidnapping and slaughter by Baitullah Mehsud's fighters of 28 men near Tank, some of whom were shot and others had their throats cut. Even this pales before the hundred or more attacks by suicide bombers over the last year, that made bloody carnage of soldiers and officers, devastated peace jirgas and public rallies, and killed hundreds praying in

mosques and at funerals.

These murders were largely ignored or, when noted, simply shrugged off. The very different reactions to the casualties of American and Nato violence, compared to those inflicted by the Taliban, reflect a desperate confusion about what is happening in Pakistan and how to respond.

Some newspaper and television commentators want Pakistan to withdraw from the American-led war on al Qaeda and the Taliban, to stop US fuel and ammunition supplies into Afghanistan, and hit hard against Afghan troops when provoked. One far-right commentator even urges turning our guns against the Americans and Nato, darkly hinting that Pakistan is a nuclear power.

There is, of course, reason for people in Pakistan and across the world to feel negatively about America. In pursuit of its self-interest, wealth and security, the United States has for decades waged illegal wars, bribed, bullied and overthrown governments, supported tyrants, undermined movements for progressive change, and now feels free to kidnap, torture, imprison, and kill anywhere in the world with impunity -- all this, while talking about supporting democracy and human rights.

Even Americans -- or at least the fair-minded ones among them --

admit that there is a genuine problem. A June 2008 report of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs entitled "The Decline in America's Reputation: Why?" concluded that contemporary anti-Americanism stemmed from "the perception that the proclaimed American values of democracy, human rights, tolerance, and the rule of law have been selectively ignored by successive administrations when American security or economic considerations are in play."

American hypocrisy has played into the hands of Islamic militants. They have been vigorously promoting the notion that this is a bipolar conflict of Islam, which they claim to represent, versus imperialism. Many Pakistanis, who desperately want someone to stand up to the Americans, buy into this.

This is a fatal mistake. The militants are using America as a smokescreen for their real agenda. Created by poverty, a war-culture, and the macabre manipulations of Pakistan's intelligence services, the militants want more than just to fight an aggressor from across the oceans.

Their goal is to establish their writ over that of the Pakistani state. For this, they have been attacking and killing people in Pakistan through the 1990s, well before 9/11.

Remember also that the 4,000-plus victims of jihad in Pakistan over the last year have been Muslims with no connection at all to America. In fact, the Taliban are waging an armed struggle to remake society. They will keep fighting this war even if America were to miraculously evaporate into space.

A Taliban victory would trans-

port us into the darkest of dark ages. These fanatics dream of transforming the country into a religious state where they will be the law. They stone women to death, cut off limbs, kill doctors for administering polio shots, force girl-children into burqa, threaten beard-shaving barbers with death, blow up girls schools at a current average of two per week, forbid music, punish musicians, destroy 2000-year statues.

Even flying kites is a life-threatening sin. The Taliban agenda has no place for social justice and economic development. There is silence from Taliban leaders about poverty, and the need to create jobs for the unemployed, building homes, providing education, land reform, or doing away with feudalism and tribalism. They see no need for worldly things like roads, hospitals and infrastructure.

If the militants of Pakistan ever win it is clear what our future will be like. Education, bad as it is today, would at best be replaced by the mind-numbing indoctrination of the madrassas, whose gift to society would be an army of suicide bombers.

In a society policed by vice-and-virtue squads, music, art, drama, and cultural expressions would disappear. Pakistan would tribalise and resemble a cross between Fata and Saudi Arabia (minus the oil).

Pakistanis tolerate these narrow-minded, unforgiving men because they claim to fight for Islam. But the Baitullahs and Fazlullahs know nothing of the diversity, and creative richness of Muslims, whether today or in the past.

Intellectual freedom led to science, architecture, medicine, arts and crafts, and literature, that were the hallmark of Islamic civilisation in its golden age. They grew because of an open-minded, tolerant, cosmopolitan, and multi-cultural character. Caliphs, such as Haroon-al-Rashid and Al-Mamoun, brought together scholars of diverse faiths and helped establish a flourishing culture.

Today's self-declared amir-ul-momineen, like Mullah Omar, would gladly behead great Islamic scholars like Ibn Sina and Al-Razi for heresy and burn their books.

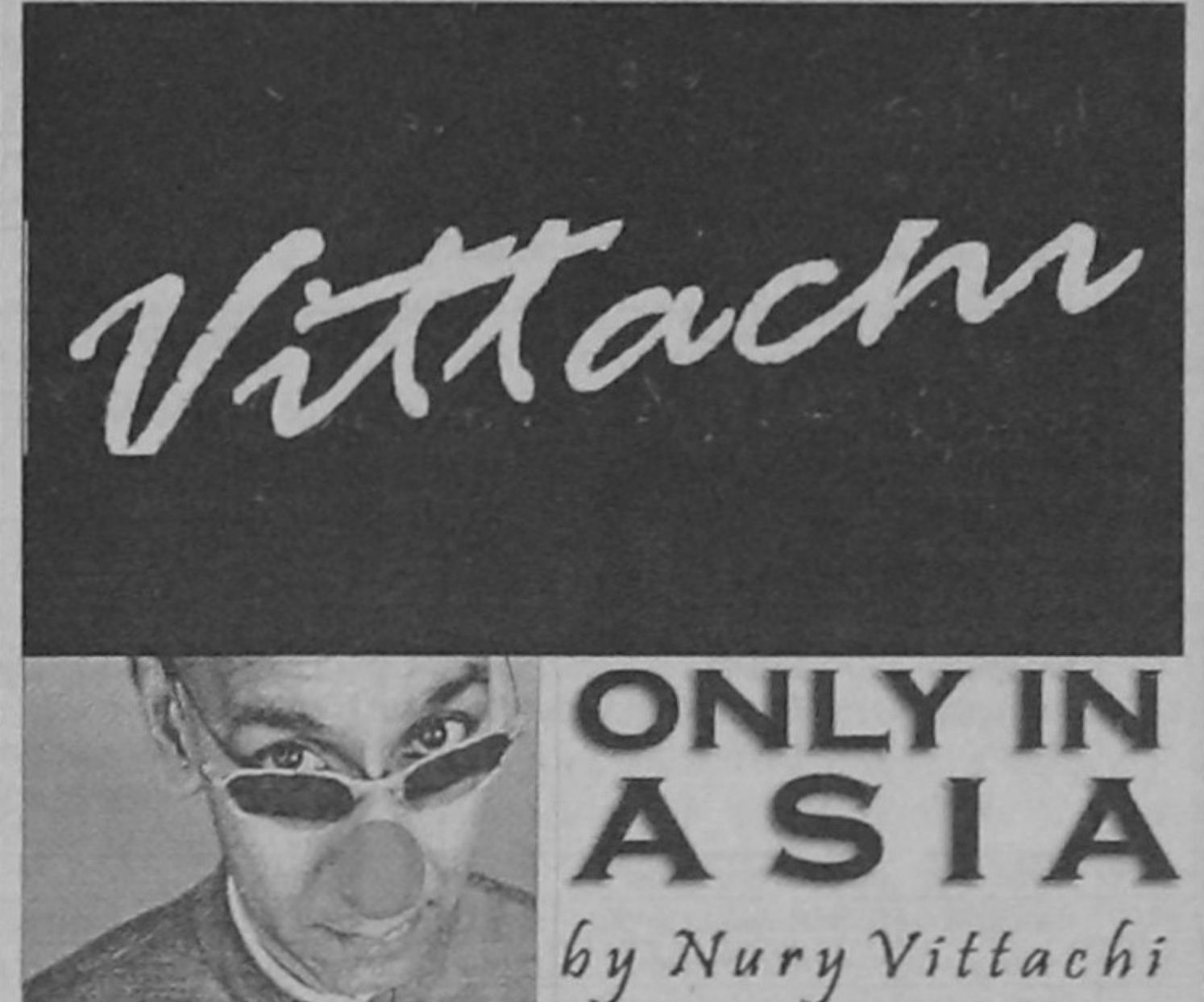
Pakistan must find the will to fight the Taliban. The state, at both the national and provincial level, must assert its responsibility to protect life and law rather than simply make deals.

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Pakistanis must not be deceived. This is no clash of civilisations. To the Americans, Pakistan is an instrument to be used for their strategic ends. It is necessary and possible to say no. But the Taliban seek to capture and bind the soul and future of Pakistan in the dark prison fashioned by their ignorance. As they now set their sights on Peshawar and beyond, they must be resisted by all possible means, including adequate military force.

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Water wars are about to begin and I'm going to win

HERE'S a wonderful modern sales technique. You go up to someone and say: "We'd like to sell you something you don't need because you already have it."

Now people like me who have an intelligent, rational attitude to spending money (my wife prefers the colloquial term "repulsive old miser") would respond: "No thanks. I already have the things I already have."

But the reply of the typical fanatical consumer (I prefer the technical term "my wife") is this: "Yeah! Sure! Bring it on. Here are the passwords to our bank accounts. Take what you need."

The best example of this is the bottled water debate.

For years, we had this amazing high-technology device in our home called "A Tap." Purified drinking water came out of it. We drank it. It was free. I never had to change the batteries. And the supply never ran out, even on days when the kids flooded the apartment with the stuff.

But now we have a Bottled Water Dispenser. Purified drinking water comes out of it. It costs a fortune. It uses electricity. It runs out constantly. Family members drink from it when they can and hang around parched when the delivery is late.

Now DO NOT TELL ANY MEMBER OF MY FAMILY this, but on the rare occasions I get home before they do, I fill up the water dispenser with ordinary tap water. Nobody notices.

A nutritionist told me that most bottled water is classified as "purified water" and so is tap water. "But there is a difference," she added. "Tap water supplies are checked for purity constantly and there's an endless budget for keeping the system going. Bottled water supplies have rare visits from outside inspectors, sometimes once every few years."

After years of moaning to deaf ears about this, my pro-tap-water point of view is finally gaining ground.

At a water industry trade show

in Singapore a few days ago, specialists showed equipment they said could pipe the highest quality water to cities all over Asia. It coincided with a statement from the Earth Policy Institute that there was "a backlash against bottled water."

But the most powerful strand of my Tap Water Revival Plan concerns youth. You see, almost all young people these days are Global Warming Nazis. Taking a community's tap water, bottling it, driving it to supermarkets, and reselling it back to the community, is the single most wasteful activity on the planet.

The other day, one of my kids was sitting in the living room with all the lights on, plus the TV, plus the stereo, plus the computer, plus the iPod, plus the air-conditioner, sipping chilled water from the cooler. I emerged from the kitchen, having popped in to drink a glass of tap water. She slipped off her headphones. "Dad," she moaned. "Turn the kitchen light off. You'll cause global warming and WE'LL ALL DIE."

This type of passionate, irrational, youthful energy is the most powerful force on earth. When I marshal squads of youths all over the world to campaign on behalf of tap water as a cure for global warming, nothing will stop us.

My daughter and her friends will fearlessly stride into wine bars and point their fingers at shocked yuppies: "Put down that bottle of Evian. Or WE'LL ALL DIE."

And endless supply of wet humour can be found at www.vittachi.com.



The case against intervention

The difficulty with military interventions is that your intervention is one thing and mine is another. George Bush may want to help the Iraqi people by invading that land; you may wish to use force to insure that hundreds of thousands in Myanmar are saved from starvation and deprivation.

FORREST COOKSON

THERE are currently four major national disasters that burden human compassion: Darfur in the Sudan, Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Myanmar. All are dreadful examples of man's cruelty. All are difficult for a sane man to understand.

In the first of these, Darfur, a rebel movement has been fought by the Sudanese government with a brutal campaign aimed at the destruction of the local population that might otherwise support these rebel groups. This type of terror campaign in a civil war is not new: Sherman's army in the American Civil War had a similar purpose. This terror campaign in Darfur has largely been aimed at women and children. Apparently the Sudanese government believes the way to fight the rebels is to abuse their women and children. This from a government that professes to believe in Islam!

The second of the three is Zimbabwe where a repressive government has over the years destroyed a multi-racial prosper-

ous society, deliberately failed to deal with the devastation of HIV/Aids and destroyed an economy, leading to the displacement of millions of persons. In an environment where food is in short supply the government has now decided to keep the aid donors from providing food to those who are without. What kind of leader starves his own people? This from a government that professes to be Christian?

The third is Somalia a "nation" abandoned by the world. When Clinton pulled US troops out of Somalia this country essentially ceased to have a government. The position of the people continues to get worse with food shortages, violence, and drought destroying the livestock herds. Here is a truly failed state where no one has any serious interest.

The fourth is Myanmar where the government is unwilling to help its own citizens preferring them to starve, to be sick, and to be miserable. The difficulties facing farmers are likely to increase since the second rice crop has been largely destroyed and the wet season crop

may not be planted in large parts of the country due to a lack of seeds, animals for field preparation, and destruction of the paddy fields. Help has been denied. This from a nation that professes to be Buddhist?

There are always cases like these where a repressive government acts in a way that is destructive of the population over which it rules. Somalia is the extreme where there is no government. In a true democracy government must respond as it is representative of the people. But in autocratic states the leadership feels no commitment to its people. All that matters is that the autocratic leadership continue in power.

The UN claims that there is a duty to protect one's citizens and failure to do so justifies international intervention. Whatever one may think about the responsibility of a government for its own citizens, whatever one may think about a "social contract," formal or unwritten, the repeated reality is that there are some governments that will do great harm to their own people. For Bangladeshis it was the

recognition that Pakistan had no such concern for the citizens of East Pakistan that triggered the uprising and the battle for independence.

This abuse of citizens by a government is all too common. The question is whether the rest of the world should do anything about it. One thing that must be done is moral suasion, trying to shame the government into looking after the welfare of its own citizens. But it seems strange that one has to persuade a government to look after its own citizens. Shame does not go very far.

Do any of these examples justify intervention by the rest of the world to save the people who are being crushed by the inhuman, cruel behaviour of a sitting government? Is there a case for intervention? Of course the intervention may be with the agreement of the government concerned or it may be intrusive without waiting for the approval and support of the legal government. Should the Myanmar government be forced to allow other countries to save their people? Should the rest of the world intervene in Zimbabwe to prevent a fraudulent election, the starvation of a people, and widespread abuse of political opponents? Should armed intervention be carried out against the will of the Sudanese government to save

people in Darfur? Should military forces be sent into Somalia to enable people to be fed?

There is really no case for such interventions. If the Sudanese government wishes to cause hundreds of thousand of its citizens to die, be made destitute, and be gang raped, on what grounds should the rest of the world step in to prevent or to deal with the consequences? The NGOs and the do-good organisations try to encourage or force sovereign governments to look after their own citizens. If the government of Zimbabwe wants to starve its people, let them do so. If the people of Somalia cannot form a government, why should the rest of the world do so? We are not responsible for all of the sins of the world. The terrible consequences in Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Darfur should be accepted.

The difficulty with military interventions is that your intervention is one thing and mine is another. George Bush may want to help the Iraqi people by invading that land; you may wish to use force to insure that hundreds of thousands in Myanmar are saved from starvation and deprivation. The difficulty is not the need for unanimous support from the great powers to carry out such intervention, but the difficulty of successful completion of a task that requires the use of armed force.